

Are Rats Comrades?

Some Readings of a Question in Orwell

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“All animals are comrades.”¹ The sentence is to be found in a novel which, despite advertising itself in its subtitle as a “fairy story,” is commonly reckoned to the genre of political satire or allegory. The story, that is to say, intends something other than what it *does* say, tacitly inviting the reader to engage in a process of substitution at the end of which stands a different story, that of the Russian Revolution. While the blurb assures us that the novel is simple enough to be enjoyed on its own terms by children, we adults are capable of perceiving that it is a question here of human beings and not of animals. This anthropomorphic assumption subordinates animals to humans at the very moment it makes meaning of the proposition which incites them to revolt against their masters. For if the place of the animals in the better-known variant of that proposition, “all animals are equal” is to be usurped by human beings, then the conclusion is unavoidable that some animals – specifically, those who claim to have been granted dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth – are more equal than others. By the end of the novel, one group of particularly intelligent animals has finally accepted this corollary; the others look on dumbly, unable to grasp the fact that they, too, are performing in the roles of human beings in disguise.

Yet there is nothing to prevent us from taking sides with the children in

supposing that “all animals are comrades” means exactly that, even if we happen to know that it *also* means something else. The thought experiment carried out in *Animal Farm* would then consist in determining what practical consequences would ensue were a community to reorganise itself in strict accordance with that axiom. As soon becomes apparent, it is one thing to declare all animals to be comrades; it is quite another to stand up for the rights of a rat. The first time the axiom crops up in the novel, at the climax of a speech given by Old Major, his audience responds with a “tremendous uproar” which the reader is initially inclined to attribute to the statement itself: the animals, we are led to believe, are so stirred by his gospel of emancipation that they cannot help but give spontaneous vent to their enthusiasm. Such is not the case. The commotion relates instead to an incident taking place on the periphery of the scene, temporarily distracting the animals’ attention from what the pig is saying: “While Major was speaking four large rats had crept out of their holes and were sitting on their hind-quarters listening to him. The dogs had suddenly caught sight of them, and it was only by a swift dash for their holes that the rats saved their lives.”² Orwell had noted earlier that “all the animals” had gathered in the barn for the speech “except Moses, the tame raven,” but the rats were not among them at the time.³ This could mean one of two things: either these particular rats are not acknowledged as belonging to the farm community and have no business attending the meeting, yet still deserve, by virtue of their animality, to be treated in a comradely fashion, in which case the dogs are guilty of violating the axiom just pronounced by Old Major; or else rats as such do not belong to the class of animals, in which case the dogs are entitled to attack them and are guilty of nothing more serious than a lack of restraint. Each interpretation is still viable at this stage because Major has yet to define what animals are. Clearly, the rats are of the opinion that they are animals, otherwise they would not have crept out of their hiding-place at this point in time. On the other hand, Major has just pressed the need for rebellion with the argument that “Man is the only creature that consumes without producing,” promising that his overthrow would bring untold plenty to the farm and unimagined happiness to its inhabitants.⁴ If productive capacity is taken to be the feature that distinguishes animals from humans against the background of their common creaturalty, then it is difficult to see how a rat, or indeed any kind of vermin, could justify its place in an egalitarian society of worker-citizens – unless, that is, the rats are to earn their keep by being harvested for dog-food.

The rats thus emerge from under the floorboards as a test and limit case for the barnyard utopia dreamed up by Old Major; no wonder they provoke such agitation among the others, who had thought everyone al-

ready accounted for when the meeting began. In order to regain control of the proceedings, and because this is, after all, a democratic gathering, the chair puts the matter to the vote: "I propose this question to the meeting: Are rats comrades?"⁵ The animals thereupon decide almost unanimously to welcome the rats, together with other "wild creatures" such as rabbits, into the fold, prompting Major to formulate a principle of classification broad enough to encompass the new comrades while still excluding the human foe; in its later, simplified version, it reads: "four legs good, two legs bad." Contrary to appearances, however, the rats have not simply been taken up into a pre-existing collective through the relaxation of its formal conditions of entry. Their intervention, as unexpected as it is unwelcome, has a properly utopian dimension. It forces the self-contained community of animals assembled in the barn to constitute itself, in the very act with which it flings open its doors to new- and latecomers, as a single political agent. In electing a hitherto ostracized and persecuted particular to stand in for the universal, the "beasts of England" have temporarily set aside their differences to proclaim that, inasmuch as they are more than just ducks, sheep, or cows, they, too, are rats. It is this declaration of solidarity, and not the visionary speech which leads up to it, that first enables them to act collectively upon their hatred for Mr Jones. The rats have come in from the cold to transform the passive object of Major's oratory – the coalition of disgruntled farm animals summoned to the barn at his behest – into the revolutionary subject of *Animal Farm*.

The dissolution of that subject into its constituent parts follows swiftly enough. One of the first steps taken by Snowball after the Rebellion is to dispatch the rats to the Wild Comrades' Re-education Committee, where their recalcitrance is soon rewarded with a visit from the cat. The rationale for such re-education, a euphemism for the eradication of species identity, is provided by the surreptitious addition of a normative element to the proposition to which the animals had earlier assented: rats may well be comrades, but if they want to be treated as such, they must stop behaving like rats. Their subsequent disappearance from the text, far from implying the failure of Snowball's pedagogic programme, thus attests to its unqualified success. When it comes to the *realization* of utopia, the only good rat is a dead rat, and this holds true regardless of whether or not the revolution subsequently takes a dystopian turn.⁶ That Orwell himself did not share the utilitarianism of those who wished to banish undomesticated, undomesticable animals from the rationally planned society of the future, is shown clearly enough by a passing remark in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. One of the factors that cause thinking people to shy away from socialism, he writes there, is its association with the (Soviet) ideology of mechanical progress,

which aims to engineer a world where there will be “no disorder, no loose ends, no wildernesses, no wild animals, no weeds, no poverty, no pain – and so on and so forth.”⁷ In *Animal Farm*, the rats are among the first to fall victim to this belief that the path to happiness lies in the total domination of nature through instrumental rationality.⁸

If one were to insist on allocating the rats a place within the allegorical framework of *Animal Farm*, one would probably look first to that unemployed or underpaid, unpropertied subclass whose squalid living conditions, depressed economic outlook and grimly resilient mentality Orwell had documented in the great works of social reportage from the 1930s. There, he had consciously set out to break with the prejudice inculcated in him as a child, according to which the working classes, and more specifically the lumpenproletariat types with whom he fraternised while slumming it in Paris and London, were a smelly, unhygienic, incorrigible rabble of scavengers barely meriting its inclusion in the human race – in short, a horde of rats running amok through the seedier districts of the big cities. Orwell makes the connection explicit on a number of occasions. In *Wigan Pier*, he tells how the first time he entered a “common lodging-house” it felt “like going down into some dreadful subterranean place – a sewer full of rats, for instance,” and his account of the miners’ physical adaptation to a life spent scurrying down tunnels evokes similar imagery.⁹ The narrator of *Coming Up for Air* describes a “filthy little rat-hole of a place in the slummy street behind the brewery,” where the children swarm “like a kind of vermin.”¹⁰ Passages such as these betray a peculiarly modern understanding of the rat as a creature bred of the unhealthy confluence of industry, poverty and urban degradation. For Orwell, as for T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence, the bewhiskered water-rat who likes nothing so much as to mess about in boats is irretrievably a thing of the past, the product of a milder, more secure era which came to an end with the outbreak of the First World War. The benign rodent of *The Wind in the Willows* went feral and fled underground upon hearing the first shot, exchanging his comfortable riverbank residence for the stinking inner city sewer he has inhabited ever since.¹¹

Once the rats of *Animal Farm* are read in terms of this literary trope, it becomes clear that Orwell would have to answer Old Major’s question in the affirmative, given the solidarity with the down-and-outers of this world demonstrated so emphatically in his earlier work. Yet in all the examples I have just quoted, Orwell employs the trope solely in order to unmask it as an ideological fiction: the people he encountered while staying in cheap lodging-houses, spikes and miners’ cottages were demonstrably not rats masquerading as human beings, as he had been brought up to believe and as he had initially feared, but human beings forced to live, in ever increas-

ing numbers and through no fault of their own, in a rat-like state. In other words, for Orwell, as for Snowball, rats are comrades to the same extent that they are not really rats at all. Indeed, whenever they appear in their own right in his work – and they do so with an astonishing frequency, from *Burmese Days* right up to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – they inspire feelings of such dread and loathing as to encourage speculation on the roots of the obsession in some childhood trauma. “The rodent tide flows endlessly through his work,” observes his most recent biographer, “an unappeasable furry brood piped in and out of the darkest reaches of his consciousness.”¹² We know that away from the writing desk, too, Orwell’s first impulse upon catching sight of a rat came much closer to the dogs’ than to Old Major’s.

The overwhelmingly negative connotations with which rats are freighted elsewhere in Orwell suggest an interpretation of their role in *Animal Farm* which stands at odds with that advanced so far. In response to Major’s question, one may say that the one condition under which rats most definitely are not comrades is when they are fascists. In that event, their extermination may prove justifiable on sanitary grounds, as a measure necessary to preserve the health of the body politic. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, fascism and communism are equated to “rats and rat-poison,”¹³ respectively, a metaphor which takes on a life of its own in *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell’s account of his experiences fighting alongside the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War. Having signed up with the intention of killing fascists, Orwell spent much of his time in the trenches fending off “rats as big as cats, or nearly; great bloated brutes that waddled over the beds of muck, too impudent even to run away unless you shot at them.”¹⁴ In what is perhaps the most vivid image of the book, he recounts how after months of desultory, ineffective combat, he was sent with his company to Torre Fabián to launch an attack on an enemy outpost. “In the barn where we waited the floor was a thin layer of chaff over deep beds of bones, human bones and cows’ bones mixed up, and the place was alive with rats. The filthy brutes came swarming out of the ground on every side. If there is one thing I hate more than another it is a rat running over me in the darkness. However, I had the satisfaction of catching one of them a good punch that sent him flying.”¹⁵ It was the only satisfaction he was to get that night: the attack was called off at the last moment.

The rats depicted here are beasts of the apocalypse, the survivors of a holocaust that has consumed animals and humans alike. We can certainly savour the image of their mass visitation in its own right, without reference to the rest of the book. Nonetheless, I think the image owes something of its visceral menace to the way it gives direct expression to frustrations ordi-

narily held in check by Orwell's coolly objective, argumentative prose style. Those frustrations had two sources, which in the course of *Homage to Catalonia* are revealed to have been closely related. On the one hand, the poor training and inadequate munitions provided to the anarchist troops, combined with the difficulty of the terrain, meant that Orwell saw very little action while posted on the front. Notwithstanding his eagerness to volunteer for dangerous missions, he was in effect reduced to taking potshots in the dark while waiting for the serious engagement that never came – exactly the situation dramatized in the scene in the barn. According to the testimony of a fellow fighter, Orwell once grew so exasperated by a rat that had ventured into his trench that he took out his revolver and shot it, provoking a prolonged exchange of fire that resulted in the destruction of two buses and the cookhouse.¹⁶ As an illustration of the manner in which Orwell used the figure of the rat to discharge his pent-up feelings of aggression toward the fascists, the anecdote could hardly be improved upon. On the other hand, the second half of the book is taken up with showing how the valiant military efforts of the anarchists were sabotaged by an increasingly vicious campaign of slander and persecution orchestrated by the Communist Party, which was acting on orders from Moscow to stifle a revolution in the Republic. Orwell came to regard the Party officials and propagandists in Barcelona as rats in the ranks whose constant harassment was preventing him and his friends from effectively combating the real enemy. The rats of Torre Fabián can thus be seen to be the bearers of a message which at the time of writing, several months before the Hitler-Stalin pact, Orwell was still unwilling or unable to articulate in so many words: that the comrades supposedly fighting on his own side and the fascists into whose hands they were playing were as bad as each other, 'filthy brutes' who, between them, were presiding over Spain's transformation from a once-bountiful granary into a charnel-house.

By the time he came to write *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell had no such qualms about denouncing the secret identity of totalitarian regimes on both Left and Right. This equivalence provides the key to understanding the threat embodied by the rats of Room 101, the last and most terrifying in the series. When one of their number sticks its "beastly nose" into the proletarian lodgings where Winston and Julia meet for their trysts, Winston is horrified: "Rats! [...] In this room!"¹⁷ In the context of the passage, the unwanted visitor gives notice that the lovers' sanctuary is not as secure as it seems, a warning that in retrospect appears all too accurate, given that Mr Charrington, their kindly, old-fashioned landlord, is about to rat on them to the Thought Police. But the rat's function as a proleptic narrative device is insufficient to explain the intensity of Winston's reaction, which stands in

such stark contrast to the equanimity displayed by Julia:

‘They’re all over the place,’ said Julia indifferently as she lay down again. ‘We’ve even got them in the kitchen at the hostel. Some parts of London are swarming with them. Did you know they attack children? Yes, they do. In some of these streets a woman daren’t leave a baby alone for two minutes. It’s the great huge brown ones that do it. And the nasty thing is that the brutes always – ‘
 ‘*Don’t go on!*’ said Winston, with his eyes tightly shut.¹⁸

What Julia was about to reveal when she was interrupted, and Winston wants at all costs to avoid seeing, is that the brutes always go for the face. Not long after, we learn that as a boy growing up in a time of great scarcity, Winston had effectively starved his little sister to death by pilfering food from the pantry when his mother was not looking, at one stage snatching a precious piece of chocolate from his sister’s hand and running off with it. The self-deception practised by Winston, we might conclude, consists in his refusal to recognise that for all his dreams of solidarity with the proles, he is at bottom no different from the rats which gouge out the tongues and eyeballs of unprotected babies.¹⁹ This is precisely the realization that dawns upon him in Room 101, where the same animal instinct that once led him to feed off his dying sister now impels him to betray his lover without a moment’s hesitation. Confronted by the rat without, Winston is forced to come face to face with the rat within. The resulting rediscovery of the self in the abjected Other no longer gives rise to revolutionary optimism, as it had in *Animal Farm*, but to the acceptance of crushing defeat. Orwell’s final answer to the question posed by Old Major is that rats are indeed comrades because the Comrades, alas, are rats.

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NOTES

- ¹ George Orwell, *The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Davison (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998): 8, p. 6.
- ² Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 8, p. 6.
- ³ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 8, p. 3.
- ⁴ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 8, p. 4.
- ⁵ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 8, p. 6.
- ⁶ For a nice illustration of this, see Ursula Le Guin’s novel *The Dispossessed* (Lon-

don: Millennium, 1999), in which the physicist Shevek leaves his home planet, an anarchist utopia (albeit an “ambiguous” one), for the “propertarian” society of Urras: “He had never seen a rat, or an army barracks, or an insane asylum, or a poorhouse, or a pawn-shop, or an execution, or a thief, or a tenement, or a rent-collector, or a man who wanted work and could not find work to do, or a dead baby in a ditch” (234). Why Annares should be as free of rats as of these man-made evils is never explained.

⁷ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 5, p. 176. This line is directed equally against the utopian society depicted by H.G. Wells in *Men Like Gods*, in which human hygiene has been improved through the elimination of rats, mice, and even ‘the untidier sorts of small bird’.

⁸ This path, it might be added, leads directly to the gleaming synthetic metropolis of Zamiatin’s *We*, a novel much admired by Orwell.

⁹ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 5, p. 141.

¹⁰ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 7, p. 41.

¹¹ For a similar imagining of the prelapsarian, mild-mannered rat, see Jules Verne’s evolutionary fable *Les Aventures de la Famille Raton*.

¹² D. J. Taylor, *George Orwell: The Biography* (London:Vintage, 2004), p. 144.

¹³ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 5, p. 206.

¹⁴ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 6, p. 54.

¹⁵ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 6, p. 59.

¹⁶ Taylor, *George Orwell*, p. 145.

¹⁷ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 9, p. 151.

¹⁸ Orwell, *The Complete Works*: 9, p. 151.

¹⁹ See Judith Wilt, “Behind the Door of 1984”, in ed. Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle, *Modernism Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), p. 256. Interestingly, Freud notes that rats in dreams represent “undesired brothers and sisters.” Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 474.